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ABSTRACT

Despite claims to the contrary, the English language program has improved dramatically over the past 20 years. The traditional program's drill/memorization approach was ineffectual, incomplete, shallow, and uninteresting. Today, however, the study of language involves looking at all of its aspects, sounds, words, and symbols. Instead of throwing this progress away, language programs should continue to look at what linguists see as the eight dimensions of language: syntax, phonemics, graphemics, morphemics, semantics, history, lexicography, and dialectology. Language units should incorporate what is known about education and students in general with current understanding of the nature of language and language learning. Perhaps the best focus for this renewed study of English is the dictionary. A project to develop a class and individual student dictionaries not only teaches students how to use a dictionary effectively, but also shows them that dictionaries are human rather than arbitrary creations. A less comprehensive approach involves short units on such topics as dictionary organization, definitions, derivations, and literary allusions. Dictionary study can also include an investigation of different types of dictionaries, a look at word meanings, discussions of the relationship between denotation and connotation, a spelling reform project, and a new look at prefixes and suffixes. (MM)

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NO DULL LEXICON

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No Dull Lexicon

In the last ten years or so, English teachers have raised the level of language instruction in the English program beyond the grim past of grammar and vocabulary drill and workbook exercises. Now all that progress is endangered by the "back to the basics" obsession that continues to grip education in the eighties. "Progress" may seem like a foolish word to use at a time when there are reports of falling scores on standardized tests and columnists for major newspapers and college English professors testify to the fact that modern students at all levels, kindergarten through graduate school, have both limited vocabularies and almost non-existent composition skills. "Progress" in the face of the famous "rising tide of mediocrity"? How, one might ask, can anyone maintain that progress has been made in the study of the English language in our schools? But progress there has been. Since about 1960, English teachers have definitely improved the language part of the English program, despite claims to the contrary.

The Content of the Traditional Program

If you do not believe that progress has taken place, think what the study of the English language was twenty plus years ago, when, for instance, I was a struggling high school student making B's in English. It boiled down to

dull drill and memorization; it consisted of something like the following disaster.

Spelling. Weekly memorization and tests on spelling words taken in alphabetical groupings of 25 per week composed the traditional spelling program. The words were unrelated to each other or to the needs of students. All that drill, the evidence is clear, produced little carry over to correct spelling in any other context. Students still misspelled words in compositions, however well they may have done on the tests; and they passed or failed those tests depending on their need for a good grade compared to their need to use their time in some other way, such as having a good time.

Vocabulary. The study of vocabulary usually was based on weekly memorization of definitions of vocabulary words in a workbook. Many of the words were unrelated to the ideas the students had in their heads. Unattached to concepts in their minds and, therefore, to any need to use them, the words and their definitions rapidly faded away.

Grammar. Grammar study consisted of constant review of the parts of speech and a heavy emphasis on memorized definitions. This dreary work was followed by exercises requiring the labeling by students of the part of speech of every word in a series of sentences, "parsing" as it is

sometimes called Phrases, clauses, and sentences categorized by type, again with memorized definitions and identification exercises, were also an important part of this aspect of language study. The nominative and objective cases of nouns carried great importance, although the value of such knowledge was never made clear.

Dictionary. The dictionary was treated as a mere reference work, absolute in its authority like the laws of physics and unrelated to human efforts and judgments. The emphasis in the study of the dictionary was on the mechanics of its use, drill on head words, not on how it came into being or what relation it might have to the daily activities of real people.

Usage. Usage was presented as a set of inviolable do's and don't's that it was financially, socially, and ethically wrong to ignore. The use of "ain't" in speech or writing, for example, was then only slightly better than incest and, if the actions of some teachers can be trusted, perhaps worse.

The Weaknesses of the Traditional Program

And that was pretty much all that there was to the language program. Do you disagree? Well, I remember it

clearly. What, some traditionalist might ask, was wrong with such a program for the study of the English language? "Everything," I am inclined to answer. Unless boring and misleading kids is all one wants from education, the traditional language program failed any way one looks a it. It was

Ineffectual. The traditional program was not effective in the production of perfect spellers with extensive vocabularies, composers of clear and effective prose, or speakers and writers of only the most faultless of upper-class usage. In fact, the traditional program of dull drill on mostly useless material produced students who were not competent in any dimension of language. Nothing was more common than English teachers complaining that their students did not know grammar, despite the fact that other English teachers, in most cases their own colleagues, had tried dutifully to teach those students grammar. In addition, every carefully planned study of this approach to language produced the same conclusion: powerful evidence that the drill/memorization approach to language study produced no growth in vocabulary, no improvement in spelling, no greater conformity to standard usage, and no expansion in composition skill.

Incomplete. Although the traditional language program touched on several aspects of the nature of language--word

meanings, spelling, grammar--it also ignored many others. It condemned certain words, expressions, and constructions but rarely dealt with the varieties and levels of the language, gave almost no recognition to the fact that the language has a history, and ignored how meaning is conveyed by language. Spellings of individual words were emphasized, but not much attention was given to the spelling system of English. Use of dictionaries was drilled on, but their nature and relation to what real people do in gathering words was ignored. The traditional language study program overlooked more than it taught students about their language.

Shallow. Not only did the program ignore whole dimensions of language; but, what it did treat, it treated in the most superficial and shallow fashion possible, both in the content that was presented and in the type of learning it asked of the student. Think of the confused ideas about the structure of language presented in the typical high school grammar book. This grammar--sneeringly referred to by scholars of grammar as "school book grammar"--has been rejected as shallow and misleading by grammarians of all types. That shallowness was an inevitable result of an attempt to teach people something that they could not learn and that had no relationship to their lives. It was bastardized to make it palatable.

The shallowness did not come only from what was presented, however. Unfortunately, we rarely asked our students to understand the concepts that they studied. We settled for memorization of definitions and identifications--usually by rules of thumb or tricks--of types of words and groups of words in exercise sentences.

Uninteresting. The traditional program presented language study as dreary, uninteresting, and pointless, as something no sensible person could possibly care to spend time with. It is now, in our basics era, fashionable to cast stones at all efforts to make learning fun. Surely, however, no one among us would want students to learn that knowledge about and understanding of--and, yes skill in the use of--the English language are inherently dull and without interest. Would we want our students to believe that excitement and joy in discoveries about the English language are impossible except to strange, incomprehensible people called scholars? But hardly anyone could catch the excitement and fascination of language from the traditional school program, and few if any students ever did. Consequently, the work of the linguist and semanticist remained beyond most people's understanding or interest. Those students who did develop a fascination with words probably did so at home from parents for whom word histories, puns, and puzzles were fun.

The Modern Language Program, the Modern Language Teacher

All that began to change some time ago. In the last dozen years or so, informed English teachers have begun to add dialect units and the actual making of dictionaries to the curriculum. Therefore, the shallowness, incompleteness, and lack of interest that resulted from a too exclusive attention to memorization and mechanical skill has in some programs been remedied in recent years by this broader and deeper type of language study. Now, unfortunately, we are under pressure to throw all of that progress away. But, it seems clear, the current challenges to the English program are based on ignorance of the English language and of the process of student language development. The critics know nothing of the classroom and little of the dynamic nature of language. They show a surprising ignorance of the nature of and the scholarship involved in developing a dictionary and so misuse it to support their criticisms. Areas of Language Study for High School

The modern study of a language involves a look at all of its aspects, its sounds, its words, its symbols. And that seems to be a worthwhile focus of attention for our students. A fully developed language is what makes humankind unique, not our thumb or our invention of the wheel; and our students need to know more about their language, esteem it more highly, find it more interesting,

see its potential for play as more appealing, sense the joy of it far more than they do.

Now, linguists usually divide the study of language into eight dimensions or specialities. Despite the complexity of each, they are all suitable for study by students in any grade level to some degree of depth. Each one should be included in the school language program at several levels in increasing degrees of depth and complexity. Let's look at what those areas are.

Syntax:

Study of the various systems that have been designed to explain the inner workings of a language, the relations between and among words that produce additional meanings. The traditional program of grammar study falls within this area. In the modern approach, students do not necessarily master any one system but do gain insights into the ways in which the functioning of languages may be described.

Phonemics:

Study of the significant sounds of a language, that is, those that native speakers recognize as making a difference in meaning. Students explore the entire sound system of English, examining puns, onomatopoeia, etc., as well as changes in sounds caused by placement in words and relations to other sounds in a word.

Graphemics:

Study of the symbols used to record a language. A bit of the traditional study of spelling falls within this area. In a modern program, students explore the patterns that exist in English in the use of letters and combinations of letters to record sounds and look at the more complex systems developed by linguists to record small variations in sound. They also examine systems not based on the idea of recording sounds, that is, systems based on the concept of ideographs.

Morphemics:

Study of the units of meaning in a language. A bit of the traditional study of grammar falls within this field. In the modern program, students explore root words, prefixes, verb and noun endings, etc. as a means to undertanding language as a system for conveying some types of meaning by variations in words, not just as mechanical clues to spelling.

Semantics:

Study of the meanings of words and of how words acquire and transmit those meanings. The traditional vocabulary study falls within this field. The objective of the modern program is, however, for students to come to understand something of the complexity of the relationship between words as symbols and meanings.

Vocabulary improvement is also an objective of the program.

History:

Study of the development of a language, touching on all aspects of language but in terms of sources and of changes that have taken place over time. The objective of the program is for students to develop an awareness of the complex process by which the language that they speak has come into being.

Lexicography:

Study of the art of dictionary making. After work in this area, students see the problems involved in developing a dictionary, view a dictionary as much more than a word book, gain a greater understanding of what they are doing when they use a dictionary, and develop greater skill in the use of it.

Dialectology:

Study of the regional, social, and functional varieties of a language. This area relates to the traditional usage program, but the modern program has an entirely different philosophical base. In the modern program, students explore the many varieties of English, learn where those varieties have come from, and consider the concepts of "right" and "wrong" in relation to language.

Principles for Designing Language Lessons

English teachers must be able to design language lessons and units that are based both on what language is and on what students are. A well designed language unit must incorporate what we know about education and students in general but go beyond that to embrace fully the nature of language and language learning. Several principles suggest themselves.

1. Each student has a broad resource of language competencies in all areas, especially dialects, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics; and, therefore, activities should draw fully on the resource already there in students.

2. Formal, abstract systems describing the functioning of language come to students last, if ever, and after a study of language has begun. Many students will never be able to deal with these abstractions, except in a very simplified version, because those concepts are beyond their abstracting abilities and inclinations.

3. Most use of language takes place outside the English classroom, indeed, outside the school; and it is there that true language is identified and learned.

4. Language is whatever happens in the real world that students inhabit, not in a dry-as-dust world of grammarians and English teachers.

5. The study of language is multifaceted (encompassing at least history and development; syntax; spelling principles; semantics; the dictionary; varieties, dialects, and social conventions or usage) and should be studied in all its dimensions.

6. Correctness, that is, producing language of a preferred form rather than some other form, should not be a part of language study activities. Teachers may help students to look at concepts of correctness, especially from a social perspective, if they can handle the subject in such a manner that their students do not see such discussions of language varieties as negative comments on their own language. Drill on the details of preferred usage, sometimes called "language etiquette," belongs elsewhere in the program, as a subject analogous to proofreading in the written composition program.

7. All language is learned slowly, especially after that amazing surge of command that takes place in early childhood. Therefore, to demand immediate, concrete evidence of improved language command as a result of any particular activity is to misunderstand the very nature of language.

8. Tests of minimal competencies, although not necessarily bad in themselves, must not be tied to the curriculum in language. Indeed, a genuine study of language may cause a temporary decline in competency as measured by such tests because it shakes old notions that linguistics has long ago exploded. The insecurity in language resulting from the death of old principles may produce less competent test takers despite the fact that such insecurity is a desirable result of a profound study of language.

9. Students need to think of their language as something interesting, even possible of providing fun, if they are to understand it and master it.

10. Language activities must involve the students in doing things with language rather than passively learning about it, so that they can be brought to sense that using language is an activity fully as important and exciting as, for example, playing basketball.

11. Knowing about language and enjoying knowing about it are worthwhile ends in themselves. Therefore, to study language merely as a means to some other end, such as improved composition or higher social class identification, is to devalue such study.

12. Language is part of everything that students do in school, tied to science, history, the cafeteria, football games. English in every classroom may be a quaint old notion, but for language study it is essential.

If we can accept that set of principles, then we can begin to build into the curriculum an effective program of study of the English language. The materials are there, although perhaps not as plentifully as we might wish. Devices in many media now provide us with the support we need to undertake with our students an exploration of our language. Books, filmstrips, transparencies, and films, as well as programs for micro-computers, exist in the catalogues of many publishers. The results of linguistic studies are now available in a host of books and articles, there to guide us in deciding what to teach and how to teach it. Finally, interesting and effective activities have been invented in every area of linguistic studies.

No Dull Lexicon

And, for me, the dictionary is the best focus of this renewed study of our language. The dictionary? How odd! Well, Dr. Johnson called those who create it "harmless

drudges." Children universally have to be forced to use it, and adults go to it reluctantly to check a spelling or a disputed meaning of a word. But the dictionary, despite its general reputation for utilitarian dullness, is a fascinating thing, individual, controversial, surprising. In one dictionary or another one can find not only the spellings of words, often several spellings of the same word, and their varied meanings, but also where they have come from, what types of people use and misuse them, examples of their use, pictures of the objects to which they refer, and, particularly in specialized dictionaries, how they interact with other words to produce meaning. Why then is the dictionary seen as respectable but dreary?

The cause of this undeserved reputation lies in the way in which we have taught it and modeled its use. The dictionary has been treated as a mere reference work, absolute in its authority like the laws of physics and unrelated to human efforts. The emphasis in its study has been on the mechanics of its use and not on how it came into being or what relation it might have to the daily activities of real people. From the typical dictionary unit, one would have to conclude that nothing but mechanical recording skills went into its production and that only a similar set of low level skills are required for its use. Drill and memorization have been all that we have required of students. In fact, profound matters of philosophy,

especially the high abstractions of semantics, underlie every element of every dictionary ever made. The study of the dictionary need not be so drab or superficial. Students can catch the excitement of words, their meanings, their histories, their sounds, and the controversies that surround them. Indeed, I believe that the dictionary can serve as the focus of nearly every aspect of language study and, handled properly, can add sparkle to that part of the curriculum. Why do I think so?

Dictionary Development

Well, let me say a word about how dictionaries are developed. A project to develop a new dictionary or extensively revise an existing one is truly a major undertaking. For example, a new collegiate dictionary will cost ten million dollars or more to develop. An unabridged dictionary much, much more. The development of an unabridged dictionary is a task of many years, ten at least. Webster's Third took twenty-eight. A large team of linguists will spend years reading books, magazines, newspapers, in fact, any type of written material. The size of the team of linguists--who must also be skilled editors--will range from 50 to 100 or more. In addition, hundreds of consultants from hundreds of fields will be asked to help with the process of developing a new dictionary. Consultants will represent the knowledge of

words from specialized fields such as botany and zoology--an expert on mosses and one on breeds of canines--and from naval history--types of sailing vessels and types of waves. The editors will often turn for help to experts who are not scholars in the traditional sense such as chefs, sailors, and choreographers. When the members of the team encounter what seems to be a new word or a new use of an old word, they record it, the passage in which it appears, and the source. For Webster's Third nearly ten million such citations were used.

Then the editors must decide about pronunciations. In recent years, in addition to listening and interviewing, the editors have collected recordings from radio, television, speeches, and ordinary conversation. Those sounds are then converted into symbols for inclusion in the dictionary. The editors also use the work of etymologists to decide upon the derivations of the words they include and apply the principles of a grammar system to determine grammatic uses, particularly the parts of speech.

Development of a dictionary also requires collection and review of alternate spellings of words and decisions about the frequency and acceptability of those alternatives. And, of course, the linguists working on a dictionary must attempt to gather all of the distinctly different meanings of the words they plan to include. Common words like "run"

and "fast" have dozens of meanings. Each meaning must then be described in other words that make the distinctions clear; and each must be documented. Often, especially in unabridged dictionaries, quotations must be selected to illustrate the meanings.

New words present a special problem. The editors must decide when to include slang, jargon, bureaucratic and military coinings, and new meanings for existing words. Would you have included "atomic bomb" in a dictionary from the early part of this century? Probably not, nor did the dictionary editors. But the expression did exist as an early citation substantiates. On the other hand, "Sputnik" hit the papers and the dictionaries almost simultaneously. Slang is a major problem for dictionary editors. Most is ephemeral. Some lasts. Some seems to be lasting and then dies a sudden death, leaving the dictionary with a forgotten word, although that word, unused as it may be, may also appear in a novel that is very much alive. Thus even dated slang and jargon may have a purpose in a dictionary.

Generally, dictionary editors wait until the citations they are accumulating show that (1) the word is often used (that is, number of citations), (2) the word is used by many different people (that is, geographically distributed and used in a variety of places such as magazines and newspapers), and (3) used over a period of time. A lot of

use for a year or two and then silence will not get a word into a dictionary. But always the editors make subjective judgements. They guess that a word will be used a lot, for a long time, by many people.

When meanings and spellings and pronunciations have been determined, the editors need to consider the level of usage for each spelling, pronunciation, and meaning--"standard"? "substandard"? "regional"? "obsolete"? "archaic"? The results of this set of decisions may be more controversial than any other the editors make.

And, of course, there are many other decisions the editors must make: How many words to include--Webster's Third has nearly half a million in over 2,600 pages; a collegiate dictionary usually has about 150,000. Which words to include--obsolete words? obsolete meanings of words still used? names of historical and mythological figures?

Illustrations may be used, but they take up space. Should there be an essay on linguistics at the beginning? a grammar? Should there be a gazetteer at the end? Should words made by adding prefixes and suffixes be listed and defined separately or should readers be left to combine the prefix and the root and draw their own conclusions? Or should only those that are very common be included? Or those where the combination of root and prefix produces a

meaning not fully clear from their separate meanings? Should the pronunciation guide appear on every page or not? (A trivial decision? Well, Webster's Third left if off and received a storm of criticism.)

But the linguistic decisions are the ones that, as teachers of English, we are most concerned with. You can see that every dimension of linguistics--history, spelling, semantics, usage, sound, grammar--is a part of the act of dictionary development. It is for that reason that the dictionary seems to me to be a volume worthy of serving as the core of the language program, not one deserving treatment as a matter boring to teach and boring to study.

Building Dictionaries

The core of any study of the dictionary should be the creation of dictionaries by the students. By this means they will not only learn about dictionaries but also come to see them as human creations and, therefore, interesting in themselves. Working individually, students can develop their own dictionaries of specific types of words of interest to them such as automotive terms or words about the sea or animals or sports. The resulting dictionaries should have the elements of a regular dictionary, including illustrations, a gazetteer, and biographical information.

At the same time, in order to allow the students to practice together the skills they will need in their individual projects, a dictionary unit should also provide for the students to work together to develop a class dictionary. The focus of this class project could be a number of things, of course; but many teachers have employed the concept of words most often used by teenagers, including slang, as the subject for the class dictionary. By practicing as a group on words that they use regularly, students can write entries for such words as "car," "teacher," "girlfriend," and "television," general slang, such as "rock," "grass," and "disco," as well as their own current slang. Special school terms and slang as well as more general teenage slang and words peculiar to the town, state, and region should also be included. A discussion of each step of the dictionary building process, including a comparison of individual efforts at defining and spelling will reveal the problems involved in each step before the students work on that aspect of their individual projects. A bulletin board can be devoted to the words and additions made over a period of weeks. As a part of the gathering and defining process, students should interview other students, parents, and other members of the community and study newspapers and magazines.

In order to get some idea of what their dictionaries should contain, the students will have to take a look at

several modern dictionaries to see what they do and what they do not do. Of course, they will find that dictionaries differ, a worthwhile insight in itself. They should also examine the many specialized dictionaries that already exist, such as those of railroad terms, spellings only, and musical terms. They might also look at textbooks from other courses to see how they present new terms. Most will have glossaries, but some students may come to see that, in many ways, textbooks in many subjects are really specialized dictionaries. Finally, the teacher will want to discuss the history of dictionaries and examine how dictionaries have changed from the early books of unusual words for the partly educated through Johnson's effort, working alone, to gather all of the words of the langauge and illustrate how they should be used to the modern corporate effort and its various ways of dealing with proper use.

Selecting words for inclusion will be the first problem the students will have to deal with, and they will find that establishing principles to govern inclusion and exclusion will not be easy. From discussions of this problem will come a realization that dictionaries are human creations.

Defining words is a process that is far more difficult than most students realize. Samuel Johnson, in fact, is known to have admitted to having made at least one mistake (the word "fetlock") and to have included a few personalized

definitions ("oats" and "lexicographer"). Students can gain insights into the process of defining and into the use of the dictionary by creating their own definitions. They will probably be tempted to write personal or humorous definitions of many of these terms (for example, "car: what my father won't let me drive on Saturday nights"). That Dr. Johnson indulged himself in this regard may seem to them adequate justification. The class will have to decide whether or not to include such definitions.

In their own personal dictionaries and in the class dictionary, the students will find that they have to do more than select and define. They will have to determine the spelling or spellings of the words that are generally in use, consider and find a way of writing down the ways in which the words are pronounced, decide on the forms of the words, and make all of the other decisions that the lexicographer must make. A bit of grammar will also be necessary, since the students will have to consider the various grammatical uses of the word and try to determine whether or not it is ever used as a verb, for example, or used only as a noun.

The question of correctness is one that will have to be faced at each stage of the building of the dictionaries. The class project will allow for a vote on disputed spellings, meanings, etc.; but the class will have to decide

whether or not majority rule makes sense in relation to words, a concept that has profound implications for their attitude toward and understanding of language in general. Equally important, they will have to make a decision about what correctness means in relation to words. They will have to decide whether or not they are going to include all meanings, spellings, and grammatical uses that they encounter without making judgements about them, include them but condemn certain ones, or exclude the ones that they determine are incorrect. And they will have to decide how to recognize incorrectness.

Words, of course, change their meanings over time. Teachers usually use examples from Old and Middle English to illustrate such changes. In fact, many of the words that the students will want to include in both their own dictionaries and the class project will have changed their meanings or, at least, acquired new meanings. Those changes will often have taken place in relatively recent times and will, therefore, vividly illustrate the concept of language change. Many of the words that will be included in the class dictionary, if the project is a dictionary of teenage speech, will have changed their meanings since the students' parents were young. Students can, therefore, use their parents as a resource to detect changes in the meanings of words such as "grass," "rock," and "disk."

From the actual process of dictionary building, students will learn what they need to know to use a dictionary effectively. They will not be driven away from learning by this actual involvememnt with dictionaries as they have been by the dull drills and pointless exercises of the traditional dictionary lesson. At least they will come to see that the lexicographer is no mere harmless drudge, the dictionary, no mere dull compendium.

But there are many other, less comprehensive ways to approach the dictionary. Let me give you a few examples.

Dictionary Contents

Most students will probably believe that they already know what is in a dictionary--definitions, spelling, pronunciation, illustrations. Many will already have had a formal lesson in dictionary use. However, like most people, they will probably not be particularly good at coping with the complexity produced by the variety present in a dictionary. It never hurts to review what a dictionary has in it and how to make most efficient use of that information. However, the extended, formal dictionary unit is generally not very productive for most students. Rather, a series of short units of one or two days on different aspects of the dictionary spread out through the year can allow for review, practice, and discussion of the dilemmas that dictionaries present their users (and, for that matter, their creators).

I would suggest the following dozen short units:

1. Organization and arrangement
2. Spelling/Syllabification/Capitalization
3. Pronunciation
4. Inflected forms (plurals, etc.)
5. Parts of Speech
6. Definitions
7. Pictures
8. Levels of Usage
9. Synonyms, etc.
10. Derivations
11. Literary Allusions, Personal Names etc.
12. Prefaces and Appendixes.

Rather than approach these topics formally, since this is being seen as a review, students should be asked a series of questions, both general and about specific words, that will result in a new look at the skills, principles, and problems related to each of these topics. For example, for the topic "Levels of Usage," questions about slang words and expressions, regionalisms used by the students, verb forms that the students have been told are incorrect, words like "ain't," and so forth can serve as much better ways than a formal lecture for provoking discussions of usage, usage labels, and what the students should do with this

information. And, of course, there is always the question, How does the dictionary author know or decide how to label various words?

Comparisons of dictionaries will be helpful if the students discuss the variations they discover. The American Heritage's use of panels should be examined, as well as the controversy that Webster's Third created when it modified the usual practice. Also, the students may wish to examine usage dictionaries such as Fowler, A Dictionary of Modern English Usage; Nicholson, A Dictionary of Anglo-American Usage; Evans and Evans, A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage; and Bryant, Current American Usage.

Various Dictionaries

Most of this discussion and these activities relate to dictionaries of the English language. And, of course, as English teachers, it is natural that we would be most interested in such works. However, it would be unfortunate if students did not at some time encounter the vast array of other types of dictionaries and add to their concept of "dictionary" the fact that that array exists. Such an introduction might take the form of having each student choose the subject or activity that he or she is most interested in--horse-back riding, automobile engines, flying, tennis, football--and pick a term or two that are pretty much restricted to that speciality. The definitions

in a standard dictionary will probably be unsatisfying to most of the students; and thus the need for specialized dictionaries will become apparent to them. At this point, the teacher should be prepared to bring into class many different dictionaries, matching some, at least, of the students' interests. Any fairly good sized public library or college or university library will have hundreds to choose from. The students should examine as many of these as time allows, looking to see what they do and do not do, what kind of audience they are designed for, how specialized the definitions are, what other aspects of the traditional dictionary--parts of speech, usage labels, etc.--they do or do not contain.

After a sharing of the findings, such a unit might conclude. Or the students might be asked to visit a nearby large library and explore further the variety of dictionaries available and bring back a report on any particularly interesting or unusual examples they find.

Meanings

For most students, a dictionary is a place where they find the meaning of a word (finding the spelling probably comes a close second). Yet few have thought much about how words attain and convey meanings. Although they realize that some words have more than one meaning, few have considered variety of meanings; that is, how we know which

one is required in a sentence. Few will be aware of the existence of connotations. Few will have thought much about how authors of dictionaries decide what words mean and what meanings to include.

Consequently, a unit in meanings of words, growing out of and constantly referring to dictionaries, can serve to deepen the students' understanding both of words and of dictionaries. The unit might start with a look at a list of words they will recognize. How do we know they are words? What do some of them mean? A companion list of made-up words--"drinkle," "Prampf," etc.--can be used to consider the subject of word and meaning again. Then they might look at a word like "the" or "by" and try defining it. They will find that writing definitions for such structure words is no easy task.

In the original list of words, there should be some that have many meanings: "spring," "paper," "run" are good examples. Students might be asked to consider why a word would have so many meanings. Depending on student interest, the teacher might explain a bit about the history of words, the borrowing of words from other languages, the dynamic nature of the English language. A more detailed unit on this subject--again tied to the dictionary--should also be a part of the students' language program, however.

Students should now be prepared to consider how the authors of dictionaries decide on meanings to put in their books. They should be able to guess at the type of research that must go on, although they may have to be helped to see what a mammoth task writing a dictionary is. One distinction that they will have to understand is that between denotations--which can more or less be understood as the dictionary meaning--and connotations--which might be thought of as the emotions and images that many people have and see when they hear or read the word. An examination of specific words that are likely to carry connotations--"dentist," "candy," "storm," "car"--should help to establish this vital distinction.

After they have considered what such words suggest to them, they should look them up in a variety of standard dictionaries, comparing the meanings they find to each other and to the associated meanings they have given the words. Also important for the students to realize is that words may have personal or private connotations because of associations that only one individual is likely to give to the word. And they should realize that it is important for dictionary makers to keep these distictions between denotations, connotations, and personal meanings clear in their minds.

At this point they are ready to carry out a project to gather the meanings of some words. First each student should choose some words to define. The words should each have a number of definitions--but not too many--and at least some connotations as well. The teacher will want to help with this selection. Then each student will need to become familiar with the definitions that appear in a number of dictionaries and to consider possible connotations for each of his or her words. Thus equipped, the students can fan out into the school, gathering meanings from students and teachers. After a few days of research, the results can be used to review the concepts of "word," "meaning," "denotation," and "connotation."

Spellings

A major use of the dictionary for most students is to find standard or acceptable spellings of words. Spelling is a sore subject with many students who are rather shaky in their sense of patterns of spelling and not possessed of very good visual memories. In most cases, students probably believe that spellings are arbitrary and without reason. They also believe that the dictionary spellings are the true and only way to spell words. Neither belief is, of course, correct.

A unit on spelling and dictionaries should contain two main sections. First, students should examine a large

number of words, looking for what usually seems to be the way sounds are spelled. They should try to come up with some descriptions--they might be called rules--of these standard spellings. The consonants are relatively easy (although, for example, the sound /sh/ has at least 14 different spellings, including those in "shoe," "sugar," and "issue." The vowel sounds are much harder. They should also discover the concept chat position in the word--beginning, middle or end, at least--is often the factor deciding whether or not a particular spelling is frequently or ever used. Although their sample will be too small for them to do more than speculate, they should also try to discover which of several possible spellings is most often used, which next most often, which very rarely. They should discuss their feelings about what they are finding and come to the realization that selecting a spelling for a word not already known to them is not a matter of random guessing but more one of playing the odds. Certain mistakes of spelling reveal a lack of understanding of what usually happens, and others reveal that such an understanding does exist.

As they look for patterns in spelling, they have to decide how the words they are examining should be spelled. Naturally, they will have to go to dictionaries; and they will discover variant spellings (see Variant Spellings in Modern American Dictionaries by Donald Emery, NCTE, 1973),

alternatives given by one dictionary and disagreements among dictionaries. They should discuss how this variation could be and what it means for the dictionary as a source of spellings. The teacher might also consider its implications for marking compositions. The students might begin a list of variant spellings of words that they frequently misspell. They could see this list as a way to justify their spellings when those spellings are challenged. Such an examination will, at least, help to impress some standard spellings on their minds.

In the second phase, the students might undertake a project to reform English spelling. Some of the history of previous efforts--Johnson, Webster, Shaw--might be interesting to them; but such a review is not essential to the project. However, they might examine a reprint of Noah Webster's first dictionaries to see how he respelled many English words and consider what the responsibility of the lexacographer is in regard to spelling.

Using their set of most frequent spellings, they should try to decide how much variation they will permit and under what circumstances and then begin reworking the body of words they used as a source for their rules. They will need to be alert to potential problems caused by changing spellings. They should try to draw some conclusions about such reform in terms of usefulness and practicality.

Essay on a Word

Many words have a very large number of meanings, especially the simple words that bind our language together. Students have sometimes been asked to find words in dictionaries that have the most meanings. However, merely finding a long list is not really the point of a dictionary. Rather, understanding what those many meanings are and how those meanings came into existence is what the use of dictionaries is all about. Therefore, students can be given the really clever short essay from the English Journal titled "On With Up" by Marion Gleason (November 1966, pp. 1087-1088) as a model and select a word with many meanings--"fast," "run," "to"--the meanings of which can be put together into a catchy essay on a word.

Classical Figures and Allusions

Webster's Third left out the names of people and mythological figures, and this decision was controversial. Students might look over the literature in the textbooks and elsewhere and collect a list of mythological and other such references. Then they could look them up in a number of dictionaries to see what they find. If dictionaries left them out, they might ask themselves, where would readers go to find out the meanings of the references?

Crossword Puzzles

Unless one is an absolute whiz at crossword puzzles, a dictionary is a necessity for success in doing one. Students might work on such puzzles (easy ones and specialized ones are available for younger students) and record the help that the dictionary provides. What problems do they have? What could they not find? Why? Then they might look at crossword puzzle dictionaries to see how they might help. They might consider what crossword puzzle dictionaries do not contribute. Using a dictionary to make a crossword puzzle is also an interesting exercise, although not an easy one.

Pictures

Many words in dictionaries are illustrated by pictures. Many more could be if space allowed. Students might each choose a word the definition of which could be helped by an illustration and draw that illustration. Dictionaries could then be checked for the definition and the existence of illustrations. The class might then examine the definition of each word, first alone, and then the definition plus the illustration to consider what illustrations contribute.

New Languages

An especially good way to discover how languages work is to invent a new language. Obviously, as a part of any

such unit, the student should prepare a dictionary of that language, using the full requirements of a dictionary, spelling, parts of speech, etc.

Prefixes, Suffixes, and Roots

Although the making of words from prefixes, suffixes, and roots is often taught as a dry subject, the process of deciding how to include such words and parts of words in a dictionary is more a matter of user needs than linguistics. Thus, students can consider how to deal with such made words. Should "unconventional" be listed by itself, or should the users of the dictionary be expected to look up "un-" and then reason that its meaning can be added to "conventional" to create a new meaning? Or should "covention" be listed, and the user expected to add "-al" to the root? Or should "convene" be listed, and the reader asked to add "-tion" also? And, of course, even "convene" is made up of "con-" meaning "together" and "vene," which is not a word in English but a modification of the Latin word for "come." Since "vene" is not an English word by itself, it is not appropriate to suggest breaking the word "unconventional" down that far for a dictionary listing. All of the other listings by parts are at least possible.

Students can try out such words on other students to answer such questions. They will discover that the answers are neither clear nor consistent. Then they can see what

various dictionaries do. Again they will find inconsistency within and among dictionaries.

Morphemes

Morphemes are the smallest groups of letters that carry meaning. Not words necessarily, they consist of such elements as "-s" or "-es" meaning plural or "re-" meaning "again." A class might be asked to review a body of words to try to make a list of the morphemes that they find. This analysis is analogous to looking for atoms and should appeal to scientifically minded students. Reduction to essential meaning is the key. Then the students should look up each morpheme to see what the dictionary says about it. Persistent students might search dictionaries for other morphemes.

People Words

Many words have resulted from the names of people. "Sideburns" from General Ambrose Burnside, "boycott" from the unfortunate Cpt. Charles Boycott, "Ferris Wheel" for its inventor George Washington Ferris, and "diesel" for its inventor Rudolph Diesel. The list is endless, and students enjoy discovering such sources. The teacher can provide many such words to be researched in an unabridged dictionary; students can guess at others and look them up to see whether a person's name was involved. In addition,

students can consider what words the names of teachers, fellow students, and local figures might give birth to and write these words up in full dictionary entry form. For example, a teacher named Jones, famous for his heavily laden lunch trays, might lend his name to the word "Jonesism," defined as "The act of loading up one's tray so that nothing is left for those waiting in line."

Relative Meanings

Many words mean very much the same thing; but, because of subtle differences in denotation or because of commonly understood connotations, their meanings are really very different. Bertrand Russell illustrated this fact by a famous "conjugation" that starts

> I am sparkling. You are unusually talkative. He is drunk.
> I am beautiful. You have good features. She isn't bad looking if you like that type.
> I day dream. You are an escapist. He ought to see a psychiatrist.

Once students get the idea--plump, fat, obese--they can create such sequences from good connotation to bad. Each word should, of course, be looked up in the dictionary to see if the definition there gives any hint about the extra meaning it carries. A more simple version takes the form of "You are ____ but I am _____" as in "You are stubborn but I am steadfast." Such an exercise is also a good opportunity to introduce students to the special type of dictionary

called a thesaurus and to caution them about the danger of using the words listed as synonyms without checking on exact meanings.

Well, there are some examples of why I believe that the dictionary is a fascinating document and a wonderful resource for the language part of our subject. You may not feel, as I do, that it can serve as the focus of the program; but I hope the dictionary will become at least a bit more important in your classes and students will get over their boredom with it and develop some enthusiasm for lexicons and lexicography.

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